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Nord Stream 2 pipeline proves to be a sticking point in Biden and new German chancellor's show of unity

By [Kevin Liptak](#), CNN

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(CNN) — President [Joe Biden](#) and Germany's leader sought to put on a united front Monday at the White House, but one key sticking point appeared to remain despite their pledges of unity: The future of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.



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revealed a distinct gap between himself and his American counterpart on the massive pipeline. During a news conference after an Oval Office meeting, Biden was explicit the project wouldn't go forward if Russia invades Ukraine. It's the stance he and US officials have taken for weeks, and has been a key point of discussion with the new Scholz government, according to senior administration officials.

But Scholz himself refused to even name the project during the news conference, and declined to commit to ending the pipeline if an invasion moves ahead -- a stance causing problems for his foreign minister during a visit to Ukraine. In the interview with CNN, Scholz repeated his vow to remain aligned with the US, though again wouldn't clarify his intentions for the Nord Stream project.

"All the steps we will take we will do together," Scholz told Tapper. "As the President said, we are preparing for that. You can understand and you can be absolutely sure that Germany will be together with all its allies and especially the United States, that we take the same steps. There will be no differences in that situation."

During the news conference, he had made a similar pledge.

"I say to our American friends, we will be united. We will act together and we will take all the necessary steps and all the necessary steps will be done by all of us together," he said, switching into English to make his point to a broader audience of American officials, Democrat and Republican alike, who have voiced concern at Germany's willingness to confront Putin.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which transmits Russian natural gas under the Baltic Sea to Germany, avoiding Ukraine, underscores Scholz's predicament in confronting Russia for its aggressions in Europe. Germany is heavily dependent on Russian energy, making it difficult to impose severe punishment without risking a shut-off of oil and gas during the cold winter months.

The United States has been [hurriedly searching the globe for alternative supplies of energy](#) that could be diverted to Europe, from Asia to the Middle East to domestic American suppliers. It isn't clear how successful the initiative has been, and some countries have said their gas supplies are already spoken for.

The United States opposes the pipeline and has stated clearly it won't go forward should Putin decide to invade.

"If Russia invades, that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine again, then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Biden said Monday. "We will bring an end to it."

Yet Scholz declined to specify what he is prepared to do to halt Nord Stream 2, saying only that Germany would

undertake the same steps as the United States to punish Russia.

Pressed by a US reporter on whether that meant "pulling the plug" on Nord Stream, Scholz demurred again, appearing to roll his eyes slightly at the question.

"As I said, we are acting together. We are absolutely united and we will not be taking different steps. We will do the same steps and they will be very, very hard to Russia and they should understand," he said.

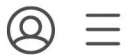
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Pipeline politics anger Ukraine

It wasn't the full-throated declaration that Nord Stream 2 would be halted some in the US had been looking for as a



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A meeting that had been scheduled for Monday between German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was canceled abruptly, officially due to a scheduling error.

However, a source close to the Ukrainian government told Tapper the meeting didn't take place because of Germany's reluctance to abandon the Nord Stream 2 project should a Russian invasion proceed. The source also cited Germany's refusal to provide lethal military assistance as a reason for the scrapped meeting.

A spokesman for the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded Tuesday morning on Twitter. "Claims that President @ZelenskyyUa didn't meet with FM @ABaerbock in order to send a political message are divorced from reality," Oleg Nikolenko wrote. "We won't allow anyone to undermine (Ukraine-Germany) partnership." CNN stands by its reporting.

Scholz, in the interview, said he didn't know if the meeting had been changed because of Germany's stance on the pipeline. He noted Baerbock was still in Ukraine, where she met instead with the foreign minister, and that he'd sent her there to go to the front lines and examine the situation.

'No need to win back trust'

For Biden's part, he brushed off the notion that Germany could "win back trust" by publicly committing in more explicit terms to ending the Nord Stream project should Russia move ahead with an invasion.

"There is no need to win back trust. He has the complete trust of the United States. Germany is one of our most important allies in the world. There is no doubt about Germany's partnership with the United States. None," he said.

Privately, Biden has made clear he believes the Nord Stream 2 issue should not get in the way of improving ties with Germany and recognizes the delicate politics Scholz is facing with the project. His comments at Monday's news conference suggested an understanding between the two men about the pipeline, which is not yet operable at it undergoes environmental reviews.

But even Biden refused to say how the US would stop Nord Stream, as he promised to do should Russia invade Ukraine, without Germany's help.

"I promise you, we will be able to do it," he said.

Scholz has resisted sending lethal aid to Ukraine and won't spell out in much detail his plans to issue sanctions should Russian troops cross the border in an invasion. But in a chummy joint appearance at the White House, both men said fears among US officials that Germany was hiding from a leadership role were misplaced.

"Germany's completely reliable. Completely, totally, thoroughly reliable. I have no doubt about Germany at all," Biden said during a joint news conference, bucking up his visitor during his first official visit to Washington.

Scholz took office in December, succeeding a towering figure in global politics -- Angela Merkel -- whose absence during the current crisis is being felt on both sides of the Atlantic.

He arrived at the White House as Putin has assembled 70% of the military personnel and weapons on Ukraine's borders he would need for a full-scale invasion of the country, based on US intelligence estimates -- though no one seems to know what his true intentions might be.

"I don't know that he knows what he's going to do," Biden said Monday.

Amid the uncertainty, Biden was eager to demonstrate western unity against Putin's aggression.



Ahead of the President's meeting with Scholz, US officials said the two leaders would spend most of their time together discussing the Ukraine matter, including a "robust sanctions package" being prepared to punish Moscow should an invasion go ahead.

When they sat down in the Oval Office in front of a roaring fireplace, Biden said the US and Germany were "working in lockstep" to deter Russian aggression.

The dire facts on the ground lent Monday's meeting in the Oval Office the air of crisis talks, though Biden also hoped to use the session to get to know Scholz personally, given they are likely to spend a lot more time together in the years to come. They had met once before, when Merkel brought Scholz along to October's Group of 20 summit, but never as equals. Biden has sought to repair ties to Germany after former President Donald Trump publicly accused the country of shirking its international obligations.

US officials frustrated

The impression that Germany is unwilling -- or, because of its energy dependence on Russia, unable -- to offer serious deterrence measures has left some US officials frustrated.

Both Republican and Democratic members of Congress have voiced their displeasure, and even Biden has hinted at the discord, saying last month a "minor incursion" by Russia into Ukraine would prompt some disagreement among NATO members over how to respond.

Scholz, meanwhile, has faced the awkward association of a predecessor from his political party establishing close ties to the Russian energy industry. Gerhard Schroeder, the last Social Democratic Party politician to serve as chancellor, serves on the board of directors for Nord Stream 2. And last week, Russia's state-owned gas giant Gazprom announced Schroeder had been nominated to its board, as well.

"He's not speaking for the government. He's not working for the government. He's not the government. I am the chancellor now," Scholz said on CNN, responding to the questions about Schroeder.

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There has only been one other chancellor since Schroeder left office in 2005: Merkel, whose absence from the world stage after her 16-year tenure has been felt acutely, particularly as Putin tests the West's resolve.

When [Russia last invaded Ukraine, in 2014](#), Merkel played a central role as a go-between for Putin and Germany's western allies. She spoke with him consistently and encouraged other leaders to step up their sanctions to punish Moscow for annexing Crimea. She also played a central role keeping Washington updated through the close relationship she'd cultivated with then-President Barack Obama.

This time, it is not the German leader who is emerging in that role but the French. President Emmanuel Macron has spoken several times per week with Putin, and placed his third phone call in a week to Biden on Sunday evening. Macron visited Moscow on Monday and is expected in Kyiv later this week.

Scholz hasn't taken as visible a role in defusing the latest crisis, earning him criticism from Germans who accuse the chancellor of making himself invisible at a moment of strain. In an apparent attempt to dissuade that impression, Scholz, too, will visit Russia and Ukraine later this month.



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